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LETTERS TO MALAYA

III & IV

By the same Author

SIR ELFADORE AND MABYNA
LETTERS TO MALAYA, I & II

LETTERS TO MALAYA
III & IV

*Written from England to
Alexander Nowell M.C.S. of Ipoh*

By
MARTYN SKINNER

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LETTER III

S O the last handkerchief has waved goodbye!
And once again, with inward shrug or sigh,
You watch between you and your native isles
Widen the first of many thousand miles.
And, as the estuary arms divide
And mingle with the coast on either side,
Loitering on deck with retrospective mind
You ruminate on all you've left behind
And muse to think, as England disappears,
You're separated from it by three years.
Three years! Twelve seasons ere you hear again
The gusty rose-hip tap the creeper'd pane;
Or share each sight, each sound, that Autumn yields—
The lanes with elm-gold strewn, the bronzing fields;
Breathe, in the acorn'd stubble as you stand,
The exuberant earthiness of fresh-tilled land;

Letters to Malaya

Or watch, amid a forest-stripping sky,
Rooks o'er the raging sea of boughs drift high.
Three years, you ponder, ere you tread once more
A Mendip hillside or a farmhouse floor;
Rush across London to a date o'erdue;
Or chivvy Time beneath a rectory yew.
Three years, before again you'll feel perplexed
To know which relative to visit next;
Ay, and a thousand evenings ere you spend
At Ipsden one more evening with your friend;
Or from a village inn-porch eye the view,
And with your ale drink in a landscape too;
Or sip—nostalgia's draught to those who roam—
Tea from familiar crockery at home.
Lugubrious thoughts! Yet why do more than yawn?
The prospect's smooth enough, even if long-drawn.
And wherefore gaze so homesickly astern,
When nought, you know, can bar your safe return
Or interrupt you in your set career
Towards a pension, England and grey hair?

Letters to Malaya

Had you gone East two centuries ago,
When storms could break a ship, or calms the crew;
When capes and cliffs from Thanet to Rangoon
With figureheads and calico were strewn;
You might have had some cause to quiz the shore,
And wonder if you'd e'er see Martyn more;
And, as you parted from him to set sail,
With some excuse have felt your heart to fail,
Sensing typhoons between, as you shook hands,
And as you waved farewell, the Goodwin Sands.
But now, in times when Progress is so rife,
And in security man laps his life,
From this, from that, from every ill immune
As Science goes on adding boon to boon,
Why now, my friend, such moods are out of date,
The ship you tread is not of planks but plate;
And pensively to lean against the rail
Is treating days of steam like days of sail.
What harm can threaten such a castle's course?
That charted reef? This hardly felt white-horse?

Letters to Malaya

Do turbines whirr and lightships wink in vain?
Crackles the Morse for nothing o'er the main?
Already, ere my hundredth line I've neared,
The first Atlantic slopes your ship has sheared,
Left Portugal behind, and shown its shape
In Hickey-haunted seas towards the Cape.
Strange shape! of floating iron and throbbing force
Which seems, in its unhesitating course,
As round the coasts of continents it slips,
To mock the toil of centuries of ships;
So great the contrast on the unchanging seas
Between the long pulsating liner'd ease,
And those wood-sided, wind-dependent specks,
Becalmed, back-beaten, splintered into wrecks.
And such a contrast you yourself may feel,
As cabin-snug, blessing the Age of Steel,
You hear the harmless waves with harmful sound
The iron fabric of your fastness pound,
And think that those same waves in times gone by
Off these same coasts, beneath just such a sky,

Letters to Malaya

—Beetlings of cloud, blue-black as clustered sloes,
Solid with storm, that rumbled as they rose—
Perhaps o'erwhelmed some vessel to its fate,
Or washed from off its decks the human freight.
And, 'mid the undangerous dangers as you lie
Luxuriating in security
Perhaps the whole grim scene your fancy forms—
The sea-mauled ship whose motion is the storm's
Pitching and plunging in a waste of waves,
The forms swilled overboard whom no one saves,
The shriek the shrieking tempest does not drown
As hugged into the deep the hull goes down,
Leaving on the torn wilderness no traces
Save one small patch of ocean bobbed with faces;
The many dots that disappear, the few
That float on wreckage, or still struggle to;
The husband floating singly, horror-faced;
The raft-corpse, by a living child embraced;
The cried-to, clung-to, boat that tugs away—
A coop of wretches, doomed, day after day,

Letters to Malaya

To learn how slowly thirst and hunger slay—
Then, as the last few pangs are sealed with foam,
The other pangs of those who grieve at home:
—For suffering does not cease, it does but roam—
The lover, listless, who was once elate;
The parents waiting, who will always wait;
The broken merchant seeing the future snap;
The friend, heart-haunted by the unseen gap.
All these in reverie your thoughts include
As on the perils of past storms you brood;
Till suddenly arousing with a stare
You gaze around your cabin and compare:
Eye its bright taps, switched light, electric fan,
And think of all Man's brain has done for Man
And of the blessings brought to humankind
By human ingenuity of mind,
And how fallacious 'tis the past to praise
Like Martyn, that laudator of old days.
What though some shapes of ugliness are rife
If shapes of pain are modernized from life?

Letters to Malaya

What though by Cowleys colleges are skirted
If agonies like shipwreck are averted?
What though the arts and graces lose their knack
If husbands do not drown and sons come back?
What though . . . but here a loud explosive roar
—Just as your three ‘what thoughts’ expand to four—
Shakes you, sarong’d and bagu’d, to the floor.
Out go the lights, you hear a crash of glass,
A hive-like hubbub, steps that stumbling pass.
Then ’mid a noise of tramplings, shouts and whistles
You grab your lifebelt, pocket the epistles,
Feel through the dark and, as the door you find,
O’erhear a steward say the ship’s been mined.
Then down the passage grope, a tilted maze,
And crabwise climb the stairs that slope two ways;
So gain a deck, and round about you gaze.
Stricken, its structure at a sharp incline,
—A huge Goliath to that pebble-mine—
The ship is slowly settling on its side.
Above, the slackening storm has opened wide

Letters to Malaya

And sudden clouds shoot o'er the moon's still shape
Like stragglers in a panic to escape,
Contrasting in their agitated chase
With that calm scene beneath them taking place.
For calm it is, calm as if being rehearsed.
By every busying boat, the women first,
The men behind, in patient clusters stand,
Silent or talking, stoical or bland,
As if that grim surround of waves and gloom,
Which any minute may become their tomb,
Was a framed seascape in the smoking-room.
How different from that scene so terror-tainted
Of savage *sauve qui peut* which Byron painted!
For here no Juan mounts guard o'er the rum
(Though many a chill cheek shows the need for some),
No frantic forms their arms to Heaven are flinging
(Though someone sets the children carol-singing),
No panic-stricken rabble rush the boats
(Although one small-eyed man, made fat with coats,
Each time the vessel lurches, never fails

Letters to Malaya

To stagger one step nearer to the rails).
And now such boats as can be used are full,
Mostly with women, and away they pull.
(And as they pull away your keen eye notes
Bunched in the last a figure fat with coats.)
And now the sailors, as the decks grow steep,
Swarm down the dangling davit-ropes, or leap.
You leap, drop hurtling, and with slow recoil
Emerge in moonlight, spitting salt and oil,
And blinking from your eyes the oil as well,
One head of hundreds in that slimy swell.
One head of hundreds—but 'tis not for me
To tell a hundred tales of misery.
No Byron's pen in modern ink I dip
To show the horrors of a sinking ship:
The solitude, the fortitude, the fears
Of floating men; the forcing back of tears
By those who watch the boats beneath the night
Slip with their wives and children out of sight,
And know that cruel glimpse, amid the vast

Letters to Malaya

Vindictive scowl of waters, is the last;
The waiting for the dawn the long night through,
Till, like the body, hope is sodden too;
And when dawn comes, and brings no ship to save,
The agony of slipping, wave by wave,
Into the lonely black-out of the grave;
The sound of someone singing in the dark;
The sound of someone screaming, as a shark
Slews its blank belly and up-slicing slit:
Such sights, such sounds 'twere better to omit,
Though seen, though heard by you, as through slow
hours

You float, swim, shiver, till at length your powers
Begin to ebb; your lifebelt sags; the spray
Looms large; remotely shrinks the sky away.
And as sick blackness blots your fight for breath,
In that convulsive second close to death
Your whole life flashing by you you discern,
As if the pages of a book did turn
Over and over in your drowning brain.

Letters to Malaya

You see yourself at Ipsden once again
Heaving the harvest with uncertain prong.
You see yourself at supper in Hong Kong,
Then slung between two jogging coolies' necks,
Half up Mount Omei's side, your size a speck's.
Then sliding in a sampan through a scene
Of bridges, wavy rocks and drooping green,
And valleys vaguely crowned with lofty traces
Of mountains peeping out from misty spaces.
Then—junks and temples turned to tugs and spires—
You see the Avon Gorge beneath your tyres,
Cycling . . .

Alex The Avon Gorge? This grows malicious.
Sink me you may in wreck supposititious.
But when you have me helpless in the sea,
To use the occasion for biography—
This goes beyond the border! In a minute
You'll have my Oxford days and school-days in it,
And show me, just exempt from canes and classes,
Collecting friends as some do books or brasses;

Letters to Malaya

Or High Church ritual discussing keen,
An Anglo-Catholic of just fifteen.
It's time to put a stop to such contriving
By reassuring you I'm still surviving—
No blanket Sinbad posing for the Press,
A mid-Atlantic Lycidas still less,
But whole and hale; my only taste of brine
When shaved by Neppy as we crossed the Line
—Great Neptune, once a god with rites and laws,
And now a kind of sailors' Santa Claus.
If pensively receding shores I viewed,
It was your plight, not mine, that made me brood.
No fear of not returning crossed my mind.
My fears were for the land I left behind:
Ordealed, sprayed with havoc, nightly burning;
What would remain of it at my returning?
Of age-old loveliness what unwrecked traces?
Of life-long friends, how many greeting faces?
Such queries could be answered but in dread.
I thought of cities sacked from overhead:

Letters to Malaya

Oxford lopp'd spireless, Bath reduced to walls,
My parents' home in ruins, and St. Paul's;
Friends mute, and Martyn's impious self become
A pious epitaph upon a tomb.

Yes, when to Ipsden next my way I trace,
That porch, I mused, may frame a stranger's face;
And, if by such his name is recollected,
Across familiar fields I'll be directed,
To find our friendship and the epistled past
Beneath a hummock in the churchyard grassed.

Martyn Or not even that. For 'neath war's winged
advance

The very churchyards now must take their chance,
And even a country tombstone's Rest in peace
May seem satirical in days like these,
And read like some grim joke to those who pass
Among the bones bomb-scattered on the grass.
To such a world returning, why assume
You'll find my house still standing or my tomb,
When not one trace of me may greet you later,

LETTER IV

SIX months already gone of thirty-six!
And still upon my lap my poem kicks—
A struggling infant scarce ten pages wide
And certainly not yet its parent's pride—
Even now perhaps, fast ferried through the skies,
You read the first instalment of its cries
And, with your coffee cup half raised to lip,
Peruse my couplets and forget to sip.
Or else, verandah'd cool o'er Ipoh's wave,
Your thumb in the anthology I gave,
Soon as the mail arrives you drop your book,
With eager nail the envelope unhook,
And break the spell of some enchanted line
To pore (with what discrepancy!) on mine.
How sharp a change from gold to grimy hues
You must be conscious of as you peruse!
From Kubla's dome or Camelot's thronged spires.

Letters to Malaya

Descending suddenly to tugs and tyres;
And quitting, for this factoried world of ours,
A world of myths and gods and magic powers—
Lake-brandished swords, sky-flashing steeds of brass,
Avilion's vales and Accidalia's grass,
Stone-quiet Saturn, Ariel o'er the rock,
And Ariel himself the guard of Shock.
Whence can the poet cull such marvels now?
Does Thames with pride survey his rising Slough?
And what a contrast, in a world of steel,
Between the enchanted landscape and the real—
The vale of Ida as Oenone knew it,
The vale of Ida with a railway through it;
Roamed by Alastor, the Chorasman waste,
And the same region by a pipe-line paced.
Small wonder then if these epistles seem
The banks of poetry without the stream;
And as you put the older poets down
And take up me, you do so with a frown.
For even if their equal, how could I

Letters to Malaya

Replace, 'mid tractored fields and throbbing sky,
Sweet Thames, sweet Auburn, and the sylvan Wye?
With Ipoh's ridges rival Delphi's steep,
And Agnes' lambs unshorn with Ipsden's sheep?
Ah, no, a less exalted lot is mine—
To hand the world its medicine, not its wine.
Not soar on Fancy's wing beyond events,
But scan them from the perch of common sense;
And sparrow-like with perky pinion fly
At treetop level and just chimney high.
Yet even as I gaze around this room
Imagination stirs a rebel plume,
And starts to steal away—'tis Beauty calls—
Roused by the pictured world upon the walls,
Mountains that o'er the mantelpiece ascend,
Rivers that roam towards the sofa's end:
The world of China, and a world that gleams
With blossoms and pagodas, silks and streams,
Mist-headed mountains, torrent-clad defiles,
Isle-dotted lakes and temple-dotted isles.

Letters to Malaya

In such a world—if I from such could write—
How would my Fancy wing away in flight!
And—with those older poets to compare—
What raptured verse I might compose from there!
For there no Progress, smirching through the land,
Would push this pen of satire in my hand.
No drab modernity would there depress
With ugliness, on all sides ugliness—
Mountains up which funiculars ascend,
Rivers whose banks with faithful railways blend.
Nor would the poet, haunting Nature there,
Be roared at from the furrow, lane and air;
Nor, as he loitered by the lake's soft gleam,
Would the fixed mutter mock him from his dream.
No clumps of concrete there his gaze would baulk,
No hoardings blurt their wares across his walk,
No blotch of suburbs sicken him with ire,
No skyline scribbled o'er with poles and wire;
Nor would black chimneys, belching forth their blight,
Picket the distance and turn back delight.

Letters to Malaya

No, there delight would never be turned back,
No roofs would there be red, no chimneys black;
But, undisfigured by one alien trace,
Nature would reign in majesty and grace.
Not primitive, as when she first began,
Not dominated by the works of Man;
But in a middle state between the two,
As if Man did not ravish her, but woo.
As if her valleys, woods and mountains dim
She'd handed as a heritage to him;
Who, matching what he wrought with what he saw,
Had made it his, in love, delight and awe.
Whereby a blended loveliness arose
—A loveliness which Nature only knows
When Man in his environment concurs—
Landscapes half his, cool courtyards almost hers;
Willows which dangle with a painting's ease
O'er roofs as graceful in their growth as trees;
Lakes where the poet undisturbed would glide
Through scenery tranquil as a vase's side;

Letters to Malaya

Shores where the ripple breaks beneath the tree
And only junks would jar his reverie;
Forests like temples; caverns carved sublime;
Fields freshly planted; cities faint with time;
Remotest summits, sacred for their shrines;
And lacquer palaces in parks of pines.
Do not such scenes to poetry invite?
Set among such, ought not my Muse to write?
Already, as my eager thoughts escape,
I seem to see epistles taking shape:
Mountains begin to gather round my lines;
A golden city in a couplet shines;
And traffic trundles to the whisk of feet,
And human grows the hum of every street;
Lakes show their shores; and down the verse there
floats
A dainty festival of dragon-boats,
An ornamental fleet, a thousand rills,
A hundred bridges, blue pagoda'd hills;
And coloured lanterns, in the twilight hours

Letters to Malaya

Across the water coming out like flowers.
Or to some solitude I make retreat
And, gazing downward from my mountain-seat,
Watch where a mighty river seaward strays
For weeks together, as our Thames for days,
Wandering from plain to plain, unseen its end,
A teeming province tucked in every bend.
Else, in a courtyard hung with birds and flowers
I'd sit, forgetting ever day had hours,
While by old tales my ears would be beguiled,
Tales that were old ere Chaucer was a child,
Tales of fierce demons, hermits unafraid,
Fairies and phoenixes and towers of jade;
Of Boddhisattvas, and the untroubled glen
Where holy lions fawn on holy men,
And lotus-shouldering sages wave goodbyes,
And up the valley trudge to Paradise.
Last, as the letter gathers to a close
—For to its end its outline dimly shows—
With some grave mandarin I'd sip my tea,

Letters to Malaya

Where rays reveal, men fly, the æther sings,
If Wisdom dedicates its thought to things,
And germs and gadgets form the sage's goal,
Not poise of mind and steadiness of soul?
Thus, if indeed it is for these you look,
Why, seek them . . .

Martyn In the East.

Alex And in a book.

For there alone in this awakened Age
You'll find they flourish—on the printed page.
Dream if you like—a poet must have dreams—
Of libreried lakes, pavilioned Academes,
Where Plato-mandarins calm thoughts pursue;
But don't delude yourself such dreams are true.
The world is of a piece. You know the West.
D'you think that China, too, has not progressed?
D'you think it's in our hemisphere alone
That towns and trade have come into their own;
That it is only under Western skies
Virtue invests, and Wisdom sells and buys,

Letters to Malaya

And old beliefs are routed by Research,
And idol-State succeeds to idle Church?
As for your China, undisturbed, serene,
So lovely on a scroll or painted screen
—Fold up the screen, the hanging scroll upwind it,
Your world has gone and where else will you find it?
Where else forget that ever day had hours?
In Shanghai's water-front of office-towers?
In clearings bright with missionary bricks?
In vales where pylons with pagodas mix?
In the cool courtyard where the sound-box croons?
In lighted streets whose brilliance mars the moon's?
Wince though you will, the question-marks are just,
And so endure their searching crooks you must
—Keen instruments, that clear the mind's confusion,
Probing each thought for soft spots of illusion—
And your illusion, faith, is far from small
If you believe the pictures on your wall
Show modern China. China, true, they show,
The China of a century ago,

Letters to Malaya

A vanished world to which no vessel steers,
Washed by the ocean not of waves but years.
Let Fancy linger by those changeless shores;
Truth, if it takes a liner and explores,
Will reach a China neither quiet nor quaint,
But loud with wheels and bright with poster paint:
A land where old and new contrasting reign,
Half aluminium and half porcelain;
Where the calm mandarin on business keen
Lolls Homburg-hatted in a limousine;
And the robed angler, wearing rims of glasses,
Rocks in his sampan as the steamer passes.
For, shun the modern world howe'er you will,
You'll find its countenance confronts you still
—In Madagascar as in Notting Hill.
And even if, remote in Asia's breast,
Some tribe exists by Science still unblest;
Some land of low huts and the wether's bell,
Where oxen till the earth and wind the well,
And men live on in stalwart isolation

Letters to Malaya

As Homer's heroes once or Isaac's nation,
Alike the steamer's chug, the bomber's drone
Unheard, and even the name of Ford unknown;
Yet even here the modern world you'll find
Exerts an influence upon the mind.
For even here strange stories have progressed
Of a new magic stirring in the West,
Wild puzzling tales of junks with sails of steam,
Rivers made slaves, and iron roads that gleam.
So that the tribesman, seated by his fire,
Forgets the floating carpet of his sire,
To talk of voices floating down a wire;
And as he tends his sheep, or works the soil,
Escapes to Paradise amid his toil,
Day-dreaming of a world beneath the sun
Where all the work by wizardry is done:
Where ploughs advance unhelped by hooves or feet,
And—here he smiles—the ploughman has a seat;
Where huts tower up a hundred huts in size,
(O that he might but see one ere he dies!)

Letters to Malaya

And hollow ropes are used to milk the herds,
And men explore the sky in leather birds.
Thus, standing mute or passing through the plain,
He doubts, and wonders, and believes again;
And stares towards the mountains in the West,
And dreams that all beyond their rim is rest;
Turns up perhaps an ant-hill with his crook,
And guesses even so a street must look;
Or gazing from his fleeces to the night,
Thinks of the stars as Heaven's electric light.

Martyn Well, if my fancy mounts, so too does yours.
 What flight is this above a peasant's chores!
 Yet I perceive your meaning plain enough,
 You think Romance is antiquated stuff.
 For in a world like ours, familiar grown,
 Explored, explained, and every wonder shown,
 Imagination, if it seeks to fly,
 Will find itself a bird without a sky.
 Where'er it roams, or hovers to alight,
 Still, still, the factory-world obtrudes its blight,
 With ugly outline or discordant sound
 Driving the magic from enchanted ground.
 A pond of willows pearl-lit from behind
 By the faint West, stray stars, a gently fitful wind . . .
 What shores remote, what shapes of fancy fill the mind!
 Down the dark lane the sudden headlights tear.
 Away goes all the vision in the glare.

Letters to Malaya

Thus even night grows starless and unstrange.
And thus at home, abroad, where'er you range,
You'll find the ghost of Beauty laid by change:
Coal-pits, not Comus, in the woods of Wales;
Red villas round the coast that was the Graal's;
Turbines that tamper with Sicilian brooks;
And close to Calvary a branch of Cook's.
In such a world, what prospect for Romance?
Poets may feign, but feigning's not pretence.
Between the two the difference is no less
Than that of Fancy and mere fancy-dress.
Then farewell all the fictions, false and true,
That roused me once to rapture—

Alex

And still do.

Martyn The myths and marvels of an earlier rhyme:
Gods, faeries, knights, wild, eerie and sublime,
Sinbads and sylphs, farewell—you are not for our time.
The Age of Miracles long since has passed.
Romance must follow it into the vast,
Leaving the poet with no other scope

Letters to Malaya

Than just to wave the flag of social hope;
Heckle proud Science on her upstart height;
Deplore the joint mis-creeds of Left and Right;
(Oft of the tail that wags the dog we've heard,
So now the wing-tips agitate the bird)
Lament a landscape's mutilated charm,
Or write a Georgic for a factory-farm.

Alex Not so, not so. 'Tis like the kings of France—
Romance is dead, and so—Long live Romance!
Imagination, with no skies to search,
Resembles not an eagle on a perch.
The wingéd bird is not her only rôle.
If heaven is barred, 'tis hers to play the mole.
If seas grow tame, to sail the human soul.
Geography, 'tis true, no more inspires
With gorgeous scenes, weird worships, quaint attires;
No more in cockle-shapes of cloth and board
Men voyage forth to search the unexplored,
Rumour their guide, uncertain what they'll find
Beneath the huge horizon, legend-lined;

Letters to Malaya

No more across the ocean ships return
Fresh from the ends of Earth, the globe astern,
Homeward for Europe's tiny corner bound,
Tense with the tidings of a world new-found,
Tidings of icebergs, cannibals, of lands
With naked giants stalking on the sands;
Of northern waters where the whale's spent cry
Gives warning of some hideous whirlpool nigh,
Swivelling the sea; of cities in Peru
Whose dazzling like the old world never knew,
So wide, that those who through them make their way
Press on from square to square, day after day;
Of beasts encountered, sheep with pendent ears
Like aprons, river-horses huge as weirs,
Fell-grinning mantichors with teeth in tiers;
Or customs strange, idolatries perverse,
The widow burning on the husband's hearse;
Tales, too, of treasure, Eldorado's dream,
Bengala's opulence; of lands that teem
With gems and ingots; lands whose monarchs weigh

Letters to Malaya

Themselves with gold, and then—so rich are they—
Step from the scales, and to the poor it pay;
Or secret realms, remote from greed or rage,
Whose simple tribes live out the Golden Age,
Plateaus of Paradise! where rivers wide
Laze over cliffs and through Guiana glide;
Where all the earth is gold, each rut a bar,
And every worm-cast glitters like a star,
And like a miser's hoard the mole-hill gleams from far.
No more by suchlike wonders we're excited.
If waters fall, we know some town's well lighted.
If mountains burn, the camera proves it true.
If cameleopards live, they're in a Zoo.
And where's the wonder in a photograph,
The rapture in a Regent's Park giraffe?
Even travel changes for the worse its mode.
No more for us long views from wave or road.
A roar, a rise, a glimpse through misty air
Of patchwork earth, blank sea; a storm's brief scare;
A paper-bag of vomit; and we're there.

Letters to Malaya

Yet even so, in spite of every change,
One world remains, where Fancy still may range,
Remote, mysterious-sea'd, uncertain-shored
And only recently by men explored.
A world of phantom shapes, fear-haunted mists,
Sailed not by seamen but psychologists,
Without Equator, latitude or Pole,
The veiled, vague chaos of the human soul.
Here, like those navigators of the past,
Men venture forth into the unknown vast,
Research the ship, analysis the mast;
Quitting not Scilly's specks, the faint Azores,
But leaving in their wake the very shores
Of consciousness itself, and reason's rim
Behind them like a sea-mark dwindling dim.
So Frazer roams around the savage mind,
The Golden Bough another Golden Hind;
Thus Freud unbares the secret of the will,
The soul's Magellan . . .

Martyn

Or its Mandeville.

Letters to Malaya

Alex Returned, what tidings strange those travellers
bring

From Man's far self, remoter than Peking!
What voyages they make of their researches
To rival those of Hakluyt and old Purchas.
And how conjecture startles at the sight
Of that subconscious void, immense as night,
Stretched like an ocean deep into the soul,
An ocean where no windy billows roll,
But cravings and aversions, passion-fed,
For ever fluctuate; where hope and dread
Make breeze and tempest; and the potent forms
Of black taboos brood round like circling storms;
With kindred prodigies—up-towering shapes
Of complexes, all named, like bays and capes;
Fixations foul, with weedy limbs that bind;
Madness, the ghastly maelstrom of the mind;
Race-memory, its gulf-stream fixed and long,
And wish-fulfilments with their siren song.
Beyond—and hither each explorer steers—

Letters to Malaya

The continent of Sex its outline rears;
An endless coast, that runs through all extremes,
Wrapt in the tinted haze of halcyon dreams,
Or wild with nightmares and volcanic gleams:
Now sombre, now lit up with sudden sights
Of visionary calm on far-off heights;
Then dark again, and heard above the waves
Howlings of lust from stern Repression's caves;
And monsters seen, lewd bulks of shifting size,
Bosoms with beaks, and tentacles with eyes,
And headless things that watch you with their thighs.
What scope for you, a poet, to o'erscan
This New World, this America of Man;
To sketch its scenery, describe, portray,
As if it were Fuego or Cathay.
For here—so its discoverers relate—
All aspirations rise that make men great;
All impulses, alike of sadist, sage,
Or dervish or delinquent; meekness, rage;
The itch for conquest, or collecting clocks;

Letters to Malaya

Giovanni's opera, Giovanni's pox;
The love of country, poetry or home;
Utopia's ascent, the path to Rome;
All motives, moods, contrasted or akin,
The flirt's, the mystic's; laughter, sense of sin;
Belief in spirits, Hell's unfathomed fear,
Faiths, fashions, fables, all derive from here.
Here Conscience sits in her forbidding cell;
Here Fancy, with her rainbow and her well;
From here delusions, unattached and blind,
Ascend like mists towards the upper mind,
To puff with pride the egos of dictators;
To fill the fakir's frame, the fornicator's,
Each with its preference, as craving strikes,
The one for concubines, the one for spikes.
Here stretches—like Malaya in position—
The Archipelago of Superstition,
From whose dark tropic mounts the sound of bells,
Drums, dirges, doggerel hymns and muttered spells,
And Guidance issues with a voice celestial

Letters to Malaya

To order all things trivial and terrestrial.
This, and each other province that adjoins
The vast Unconscious of the human loins
How tempting for a poet to describe . . .

Martyn How tempting at such travellers' tales to
gibe!

But let Psychology explore at will,
I'll not intrude, I have some prudence still.
Already Science with my pen I've pecked;
Touched, too, on poetry's most modern sect,
(Great to his school the founder's name still grows,
A minor poet inter minimos)
On spite in politics I've vented spite,
And lunged out right and left at Left and Right;
The Church disparaged in two lines that sting,
And still at Mammon mean to have my fling.
Are these not enemies enough? How mad
To add one ally to them; but to add
Psychology of all foes, mad indeed!
How facilely on me the Sphinx would feed,

Letters to Malaya

{On me who, even friends suggest, perhaps
Suffer in gait from some subconscious lapse;
Whom every neighbour thinks a trifle odd;
Who lived nine years alone like beast or god)
Hardly she'd trouble to propound her queries,
But fall upon me, not with teeth, but theories:
—It's Compensation that compels his pen:
He works with words because he can't with men.
He had some talent but his schooldays marred it;
How often thus development's retarded.
Body and brain exchange each other's blights:
He writes because he's lame, he's lame because he
 writes—
And thus, by cocking one imprudent snook,
I'd give the death-blow to another book.
For critics, tired and Skinner-puzzled too,
Would hardly overlook so blest a clue.
A score of brains one watchword would unleash,
And pathological would join pastiche.
But wherefore worry . . . ?

Letters to Malaya

Alex

Wherefore, ay indeed?

When millions of your fellow-beings bleed,
When nation reddens at the throat of nation,
To give your thoughts to critics, reputation,
Why, this is paltry . . .

Martyn

Well, you led me to it.

Alex Let's change the theme.

Martyn

Suggest and I'll pursue it.

Alex Why then . . .

Martyn

But wait, already this dull part

Exceeds in length. If now afresh I start
Who knows when next I'll have a chance to end it?
Best break off here, and seal it up and send it.
But send it where? For now the yellow blight,
Enveloping the East, has joined the white.
And over Ipoh have the war-clouds burst
That seemed last year to threaten Ipsden first.
'Tis not my farm that scorched and jagged stands,
But your white villa that's in hostile hands.
No more verandah'd cool o'er Ipoh's wave

Letters to Malaya

You grab my letter or decide to shave.
A sentry now your cool verandah paces.
Mud, muddle, uniforms and yellow faces
Encroach within. The room where once you sat
Sipping a drink, a poem or a chat
Now forms headquarters. Men salute who go,
Salute who enter. Brusque directions flow
In place of conversation. On the rug
Bought for your sister, arrogant and smug
A soldier stands, with cocky victor smile,
And strokes his boot through its pagoda'd pile;
Then struts toward the screen—the screen whose gay
And lacquered folds you dreamt would keep at bay
The Ipsden draughts—and with brass-headed pins
Posts up another brace of bulletins.
Bunches of wires drape the piano's face
O'erclustering a prelude still in place.
Maps overwhelm the walls; half seen behind,
Your silken scrolls their landscapes still unwind
Slightly askew. A Buddha props a gun.

Letters to Malaya

Across a picture hangs the Rising Sun.
(Concealed, two sages stare serenely on.)
Your desk is rifled. Papers, torn from bands,
Old letters in a dozen different hands,
Piled in a heap, the orderly await
To bear them to the cook-house stove their fate,
With here and there on service more obscene
A bundle set aside for the latrine;
All mine among them—when I wrote on tissue,
Alas, how could I have foreseen the issue—
Two hundred letters, with but few superiors,
Doomed to be squandered on a camp's posteriors!
And you yourself? When Ipoh's fall was known
Your villa's fate I guessed—what of your own?
Caught in a hurricane of men and wheels
Beneath whose fury half a planet reels
How have you fared? Blown on before its blast?
Land-wrecked on duty as it overpassed?
Whatever news we hear—and some we should—
From such a whirlwind's centre can't be good.

Letters to Malaya

At best a cable "Safe in Singapore",
And how comparative that word in war!
Safe! in a citadel where every day
A hundred lives or so are bombed away.
Safe! in a bastion with no backside wall
Which even before your cable comes may fall.
And at the worst, (one prospect here I shun,
Haunted by that how could I still write on?)
At worst I seem to see you, crisis-bleared,
A passive prisoner with a rising beard;
Alone, perhaps, an empty room your cell;
Confined there, for how long you cannot tell;
Your furniture a mattress with no springs;
Connected to existence by three things:
Light from a window, your own thoughts, and twice
Each day a yellow hand, a bowl of rice.
I see you there, each hour a weary load,
Musing of Plato or of Pembroke Road;
Then pacing to and fro to ease the strain;
Then down you droop, and meditate again;

Letters to Malaya

Reflect on happy days in China had,
Surmise how long it takes men to go mad,
Think 'Now at Ipsden they begin to lamb'
And almost wince to wonder how I am.
Far may these fancies wander from the fact.
Yet if with foolish fears my head is packed,
It's not the only one that's so attacked.
What I feel for my friend, uncounted others
More deeply feel for husbands, sons or brothers.
Mankind is on the rack, nor is the wretch
Of agony, the telegram, the trench,
Starvation, servitude its only pain;
Beyond the groans, the tears, the silent strain
Of slow suspense goes on, a hostile ache
First in the thoughts each morning as they wake,
Last in the prayers each night. So Europe sleeps
And China suffers dawn and vigil keeps.
For worry, from a world where all men fight,
Is never absent nor grows less with night,
But chased by slumber from a million beds

Letters to Malaya

Crosses the sky to where the sunrise spreads,
And fills afresh with fears a million waking heads.
So now, my Alex, pounced upon by Fate
You stoop or stagger, and I wondering wait.
Yet whatsoe'er your lot, or bad or worse,
Still now and then I'll send a screed in verse;
Set down my views, imagine your replies,
And launch them with blue labels through the skies.
Perhaps they'll reach a prison-camp; perhaps
They'll greet you burnt and blistered from the saps,
Remind you of a happier day of song,
And how much lighter than a pick a prong.
Maybe they'll never reach you, but come back
After long months in sorting-box and sack,
Unread, delayed, as if I sent their verse
Not for your liking, but a publisher's.
Yet still I'll write; and when the war is done,
And shaved your beard and silent every gun;
When by this window once again you sit,
No curtain drawn although the lamp is lit,

Letters to Malaya

Why, how these lines you'll chuckle to explore,
How smile to see what Martyn thought in war;
Wonder to find his fancies flew so wide,
And cry 'Look here!' to read what you replied;
Lay down this page, a sip of wine enjoy,
Then tell the truth about Malaya's Troy.
But now I must conclude; without its break
My Alexandrine grows a wounded snake.
These lines have struggled long—I should have clipped
 'em—

The letter's almost wagged by its post scriptum.
So here's an end—nay, but I will be brief—
'Why then,' as you were saying overleaf.

Alex Why then—once more the old advice comes
pat—

The world we live in, make your subject that;
An ugly world and mean which cares no jot
Whether a poet lives in it or not—
Yet still 'tis ours: however ugly, mean,
The only glimpse of this terrestrial scene
We'll ever have. Touched by the wand of time
The past may glow more gorgeous and sublime,
Yet ever this one drawback must admit:
It is the past, we do not live in it.
Its splendours still survive; agog we gaze,
Admire, applaud—then go our modern ways.
The living Parthenon for us is dead.
Like interlopers Ely's nave we tread.
Our glory and achievement lie outside,
The cameras that click, the gears that slide.

Letters to Malaya

There, in loud thoroughfares of bank and store,
Towns that go on for ever, skies that roar,
Landscapes by poles and projects overrun,
We find our milieu, and our only one.
For though the soul is quenchless, this strange trice
Of earthly life no man partakes of twice.
Since this is so, since in the present tense
Alone we conjugate experience,
Were it not wise experience to explore
In what goes on around us, and no more;
And once again—I quote a former page—
Survey the mighty action of the Age?

Martyn Mighty? You called it mean ten lines ago.

Alex Both mean and mighty as ten more will show.
In face, in form an era self-repelled;
In strength and scale an Age unparalleled.
At random its colossal structures rise,
And brush their rectangles against the skies,
Like piles of bricks—New York is little more—
Left on a baby Titan's nursery floor.

Letters to Malaya

Yet, at the least, we grant they are immense.
And like its buildings, so too its events.
Nations have had their testing times ere this;
History its turning points and climaxes;
Empires have sunk beneath one battle's weight;
Civilizations wavered round a date;
But when in human destiny before
Has the whole world swayed to and fro in war;
Not nation hacking nation, blow for blow,
But half mankind bent on the overthrow
Of the other half? Yet now the case is so.
As in two teams humanity takes sides.
A planet, as in civil war, divides.
Neutrality no longer forms a ban.
Fighting breaks out wherever there is man.
Fighting above the clouds, beneath the seas,
On bicycles, in boughs of rubber trees;
With every horror Science can invent,
With sadism an army instrument.
Attack not now a thing of swords and hoofs,

Letters to Malaya

But smouldering cargo-decks and shattered roofs;
With cities, ships, the world's horizons burn;
And History's pages crackle as they turn.
Nor is the struggle vast but in extent
As continent dismembers continent.
Upon the outcome hangs no petty prize.
The right to smile, the right to tyrannize;
Life free from fear, or full of squads and spies
—These are the issues that will crown the strife
And bless or bleaken centuries of life.
For not on us alone the verdict lours.
A dozen Ages find their fate in ours.
The gloom and glitter of the storm o'erhead,
Striking the future, shows it black with dread
Or bright with hope; and, like two landscapes spread,
Dark centuries of servitude and tears,
Freedom and promise for a thousand years;
A planet wrapped in lustre or in blight,
Barbarian darkness, civilizing light.
While life thus culminates, what chance for you,

Letters to Malaya

For poetry, to prove what each can do,
Describing, in a vision, how the Fates
Behold each future gathered at the gates
—Sky-looming doors, impassive and sublime,
Through which events must pass, the locks of Time—
O what a choice of scenery appears
In those impending landscapes of the years!
The one . . .

Martyn I know what you would have me write.
The one of sullen and precarious light,
Its background sinking to a dark unknown,
Its foreground reminiscent of our own,
But mistier with terror's rising damps,
More foully scarred with barracks, prison camps,
As tyranny turns nations into hives,
As revolutions flicker, lit with lives.
Ghastly the distance, like a painter's Hell
Where only torturers and tortured dwell:
Parts void, whole populations in their graves,
Parts hideously quick with swarms of slaves

Letters to Malaya

Raising, not wens of stone, but monstrous grids,
A Führer-Pharaoh's Eiffel-pyramids.
Thus as the level sinks the darkness gains
Till only a disordered gloom remains,
A gloom where anarchy and chaos gape,
And a Dark Age extends its shapeless shape;
Blackness convulsed, as brute makes war on brute,
Amid a smouldering blackness, charred and mute.
The other . . . Here I'll hand your discourse back.

Alex The other blurred at first, confused and black,
But gleams of hope amid its shadows showing,
And ever loftier, ever lighter growing,
Till o'er the murk of slums and strife appear
Uplands of happiness, serene and clear;
Peace spreading outwards like a golden fan;
A golden haze, the brotherhood of Man,
Tingeing the air. What painter could express
That landscape not of hills but happiness?
What poet rhapsodize its tranquil sights—
Crowds sauntering on colonnaded heights,

Letters to Malaya

Each family a cluster of content,
Each child by birthright blithe and confident,
Environed with the beautiful, the true;
For nothing ugly mars that orb-wide view,
Its very cities radiant, though new:
Some crescenting green shores, some perched sublime
Seeming from far to be the cliffs they climb;
Majestic Londons full of groves and domes;
White Glasgows, with piazzas dwarfing Rome's,
Their Clydes beneath them, swan-like in their grace—
So spreads time's scenery as if through space;
A mingled paradise of planned and wild,
Eden enhanced by knowledge, not defiled,
And Peace and Plenty sisters reconciled.
A world at unity, its turmoils past,
And Homo, Homo Sapiens at last.

Martyn Dizzy you make me with so stretched a sight,
And dazed by such a contrast, black and bright.
O'er molehills an intrepid mountaineer
I have no head for heights or places sheer;

Letters to Malaya

Nor are these letters suited to such climbs.
I'd rather talk of Thames's locks than Time's;
In fields, not in the future, lay my scene
—Describing how tall elms in tender green
Tuck the white farmhouse and 'mid raucous glee
Nests blacken in the leaf-tinged rookery—
Vignettes like such are more within my scope
Than your huge canvas of despair and hope.
Besides, this choice of prospects you foresee—
Defeat will bring the one, I quite agree,
But will the other follow victory?
And even if such queries I postpone
To let them have a letter of their own
Yet still I falter, still I hesitate
To paint your picture of terrestrial fate.
Mere vastness does not make a subject great.
Nor will I worship at this shrine of Size.
The idol irks me, in whatever guise.
Each week reported in the news we see
The greatest this or that in History,

Letters to Malaya

The fiercest onslaught, most momentous thrust
Has taken place, or takes, or will, or must,
Compared to which it seems, if one compares,
All battles of the past were but affairs:
Cressy a skirmish, Marathon a clash,
Thermopylae a road-block hard to smash.
Yet these, however circumscribed in scale,
In glory are not circumscribed; the tale
Of each lives on, enshrined within the name.
Will our unwieldy welters do the same,
Our nation-fating, million-soldier'd frays?
The brightest stars are not the Milky Way's.
And human valour, to perform its deeds,
Requires not Russia for arena, needs
No background toppling with tremendous doom
As armies clash from Murmansk to Khartoum,
But from the simplest episodes can shine,
Can make a hunting-quarrel half divine,
Stirred with the same tense passion to prevail
Alike at Chevy Chase as Passchendaele;

Letters to Malaya

Perhaps a brook's smooth pebbles all its guns,
A donkey's jaw its tanks of fifty tons;
Its battlefields the hillsides of a glen;
Not Man involved, but two small tribes of men.
If then the times to greatness make pretension
The claim must cover more than mere dimension.
Mighty the Age's action you averred.
If mighty means what I mean by the word,
Not size but magnanimity must show it.
Make that your theme, and I'm indeed your poet.

Alex To make it that you need but shift your glance
Back to that summer of the fall of France
And let it rest. Already in the haze
Of glory shine those early, fateful days;
And there, in your revulsion from the vast,
You'll find a theme of plain, heroic cast:
A tale of flustered armies, fierce retreats,
Of magnanimity amid defeats
Like that of Rome, when Cannae's news struck cold
All hearts, yet left the city braced and bold
To meet the menace and confront and quell.
Such cold struck us that summer Europe fell,
Caught naked in the war-storm of Sedan;
Three things between us and defeat—a span
Of narrow sea, some pilots, one great man.
Who could forget, who lived through its suspense,
That time of stress, that interregnum tense

Letters to Malaya

Between catastrophe and consequence?
I recollect (I was in England then
—England, how distant from this sultry den!)
Its every moment and remind your pen:
The sleeping war that suddenly awoke;
The stupefying impact of its stroke;
The maps hung up, their vital lines in red,
From which all fighting in a fortnight fled,
Whirling beyond their corner to the coast,
Montmédy, Laon, Arras, Abbeville lost;
And then the sinister and searching word
Capitulation, for the first time heard.
The day that Belgium yielded, many a mile
I drove through London, and saw no one smile.
The sense of some huge blow about to fall
Hung over it, a consternating pall.
Men stood outside their shops and talked retreat.
Strangers, who'd on a refuge chanced to meet,
Paused in discussion, having crossed the street.
Then came Dunkirk to mitigate the news:

Letters to Malaya

One of those names like Blenheim's, Waterloo's,
Which suddenly Fame in its file writes down;
Unknown one year, the next for ever known.
How close to miracle seemed that retreat;
As if, by some blest providential cheat,
Victory had been defeated by defeat,
The winged eluded by the broken-winged!
Yet still our coasts with hazards huge were ringed,
Waiting to strike. For France was prostrate then,
And France's victor marshalling his men
To give his victory its final form.
Eerie the hush in England ere the storm:
Still skies, the stillness heralding disaster;
And one man's voice, the situation's master.
One man, whose very blemishes seemed great;
Whose life, had Rome not England been his state,
Plutarch had loved to write, and North translate;
Who time on time in those dumbfounding days
Rallied his country round a famous phrase,
Opposing to the other's frenzied fit

Letters to Malaya

Calm eloquence and chuckle-stirring wit;
For not alone with Nazis was his feud,
Stern foe to Hitler—and to platitude.

Martyn For that the poet blesses him indeed—
A minister whose speeches men could read—
But benediction's due for more than that.
The massive head beneath the curious hat,
Exuberant, pugnacious, puckish, bland,
Appeared symbolic of his native land,
As typical of England as its pleasures,
Its poetry, its turf, its weights and measures;
And by such native greatness were we shown
That, isolated, we were not alone:
The glories of our past were our allies;
The Armada had but shifted to the skies;
Churchill was now what Drake and Pitt were then.
Hitler one more of History's wicked men.

Alex The Armada! Ay, the challenge was the same,
But how unlike the mode in which it came!
The massed invasion—that was nothing new,

Letters to Malaya

The hordes attacking, the defending few;
Nor great the change, if at the invader's back
The rubber truncheon had replaced the rack.
The change was in the weapons and the ways.
To gauge it, eye each battle's opening phase:
The leisure of that stately game of bowls,
The hive-like hum in underground controls;
The Channel, with the huge slow crescent in it;
The Channel, and above, at miles a minute,
Grim, onward-coming clusters, dark and high,
For rooks too rigid, throbbing through the sky.
And though alike both fleets were overset,
What difference was in the dooms they met!
And how the picture varies, as it switches
From Clare's wild cliffs to Kent's calm downs and
 ditches,
From shattered ships to planes on cricket pitches:
A cove whose wreckage is a gilded stern's,
A tangled heap that by an oast-house burns;
Silken hidalgos leaping for their lives,

Letters to Malaya

Serge airmen given tea by farmers' wives;
The frenzied scene, of plunder, yell and prayer,
The calm one, as the parish strolls to stare.
Nor in the aftermath is less contrast:
Medina foiled—the threat for ever passed,
Goering repulsed—the onslaught merely moves,
And London takes it on her sleeping roofs.
Who would have guessed that drab and teeming sprawl
Could ever have grown glorious, epical?
Yet like an epic's seems its tale to be:
Not heroes hewing themselves heroically,
Bull-shouldered Ajax jarring Hector's bulk,
Giant Achilles in a giant sulk;
But courage less conspicuous in cast,
Of aged men enduring bomb and blast,
Of women going to work, their shoes in glass,
After such hours as armies rarely pass,
Of humble families close-hutched within
—Each one—its backyard cubicle of tin;
Earth quailing, streets collapsing, stone and splinter

Letters to Malaya

Rattling the roof, yet still their huts they enter
Night after night, a hundred nights of winter.
Such staunchness surely earns in verse a place—
The staunchness of a battered populace.
And with it, harrowing, tremendous, tense,
The siege itself, its scenes, its incidents;
A bustling city struck at from the stars,
War with its engines shattering Peace with hers.
Now at those nights of onslaught gazing back,
I wonder they should still a poet lack,
So rich in episodes that stir or chill
They seem, great action, graphic spectacle;
Horror and havoc, havoc lit with fire,
And lit with courage; London half a pyre
And half a battlefield—might not such scenes inspire?

Martyn A poet who had witnessed them they might.
But can of such a country recluse write,
Who never crouched beneath the stairs at home,
Or huddled in a railway catacomb
(Glazed, garish caves, a gloom at either end,

Letters to Malaya

Tight packed with people, close as cattle penned)?
In that grim ordeal I had no share;
Unheard by me the jokes that flouted care
(Jokes some officious jack-in-power forbade
The sheltering crowds to make, and which they made);
Unwatched the eerie revels in the glooms
Of warehouse arches, vague enormous rooms,
Strongholds to which a nightly muster flocked
From a metropolis that glared and rocked.
Nor when the siege was raised, the sky secure
Through the maimed city did I make a tour;
And, leaning on a chestnut fence, surveyed,
Wide as a park, the waste land of a raid
—Rubble where areas of life had been;
And, in those parts where London was most mean,
The rosebay swarming on its countless stems
Through ruins to a glitter of the Thames—
Such scenes a people's poet must portray,
Not I, who watched from forty miles away.
Yet even at that distance, in the heart

Letters to Malaya

Of woods and fields, my feelings played their part.
For even there, where seeming safety dwelt,
The pounding horror made its fury felt,
With drone or beam or ululating blare
Jarring the dark hush of the country air.
The ancient peace was gone. As lambing nighed
Upon the hurdled hills, that Christmastide,
The shepherd with a flashlamp going his rounds
Heard no Hosanna but the siren's sounds;
Searchlights not seraphs spread illumination;
The only heavenly host flew in formation.
Not always noise made known the far-off fight;
Sometimes the impact was upon the sight.
One such occasion I remember well:
Brilliant upon the barns the moonlight fell,
Silver the quiet slopes of cottage thatch,
Dark on each door the shadow of the latch;
And the great elm-tree, monumental, bare,
Basking in the broad glitter of the air,
How tinged with loveliness its pallored girth!

Letters to Malaya

It seemed a night that magic was on earth,
A night for Camelot or Christabel,
So soundless the enchantment of its spell!
And soundless too, catching by chance the eye,
From a far corner of the placid sky,
The red vindictive winks of gunnery,
Flashing and fading, flashing red and fading,
As London took another night of raiding.
There standing, circled by that trance of trees,
Hushed barns and softly-shining cottages,
How difficult to comprehend those flashes;
To see the unseen flames, to hear the unheard crashes
Of that inferno half a heaven away!
And yet how sinister, against the grey,
The alien redness of those stabs of light,
Doubling the shiver of the frosty night,
As sinister as if the moonlit street
Had winked and bubbled blood around my feet.
The wolf had broken into England's fold,
And when I shuddered it was not from cold.

Letters to Malaya

Close by the farmhouse glimmered. Calm and bright
A window, silvered o'er with silent light,
Mirrored the moon back from its pool of pangs
Amid the creeper's stripped and straggling skeins;
And, gazing at the room thus heaven-paned,
I thought of those two lives its walls contained,
(How apt an emblem seemed that glitter mild)
Your godson and his mother, wife and child,
My happiness! Nor are you unaware,
My friend and frequent guest, how great my share.
My happiness! Still flashed the far-off fight.
I thought of those who even that very night
In happiness like mine had gone to bed;
And now whose homes, beneath those blinks of red,
Were reeking heaps, whose families were dead,
Or worse than dead, perhaps, buried alive.
I saw the frantic husbands, fathers strive.
I watched the wardens in a little band
Around a stretched and lifeless figure stand.
One stoops, and struggles to unclasp its hand,

Letters to Malaya

Which, tightly clenched in death, appears to guard
Some valued object, purse or key or card.
The group peer down; succeeding at the last
Their leader tussles, mutters, then aghast
Stares up in silence, as a final twist
Discloses, sheltered in the dead man's fist,
A baby's tiny palm, small fingers, severed wrist.
Such scenes I pondered, sight on ghastly sight,
Yet even here reached horror not its height.
For well-planned war, in total times like ours,
To show its engines off in all their powers,
Must have a helpless victim to attack;
And London still was free and fighting back.
I thought of Rotterdam, square miles of life
Erased, methodically, without strife,
As pigment is from canvas by a knife.
I fancied what must be a mother's plight
In Warsaw, when, at dreaded last, one night
Her daughter comes not home, nor ever will,
Caught by the press-gang, borne away to ill.

Letters to Malaya

I thought of all that here could have occurred,
Even here, had Ipsden been a Polish word.
Vignettes of havoc in my mind took shape:
I saw a village derelict, agape,
A weedy garden, once a pride and joy,
And bright among the weeds, a sodden toy,
A woman bayoneted, who does not speak
Although her child wails on, until too weak
To wail, it whimpers, then is silent too;
A shell-struck barn, its skeleton askew;
A lifeless farm, no dog, no horse, no hen,
A swollen-bodied something in a pen;
This elm a tree of murder, dangling men.

Alex The vision's grim, but those were early times.
Since then we've grown more used to martial crimes—
Belgrade and Kieff; Norway's black police;
The slow, ferocious famishing of Greece;
Unnumbered hostages of life deprived;
The ghetto and the slave-market revived.
And here in Asia, by that other beast

Letters to Malaya

As savage, the squat Nazi of the East,
Prisoners for whispering shot down unwarned,
And bayonet practice with mere dummies scorned
—But why continue? Why tot up the list,
Unless to make your son a pacifist,
And cause him from this war to shrink aghast,
As you and I and millions from the last,
Who, then to manhood rising, cried “No more!
“Life has no anguish equal to a war.
“Peace then must be preserved at any price.
“War shrunk from, at whatever sacrifice”.
We now can see such sacrifice was vain.
But to our sons will this appear so plain,
Who, verse like yours perusing—if indeed
Your verse or any other verse they read—
With our warm-hearted weakness may concur,
And be the peace-mongers their fathers were?

Martyn The peace-mongers? The gibe is just, applies.
Yet was our error partly one of size.
We thought our planet still a spacious ball,

Letters to Malaya

Not realizing it had grown so small
To share it with a Hitler was to share
A drifting ice-floe with a snarling bear:
Step by grim step we backed for peace and life,
Then braved the monster with a pocket-knife.
Quiescent, could we have bluffed on in bliss?
(My bear analogy I here dismiss.)
Bohemia fought not—will our sons suppose
Bohemia sipped the sparkle, snuffed the rose?
Bohemia's fate—a nation gagged and jailed—
Would have been Man's if one man had prevailed.
A choice of evils lay our life before—
The bomber o'er the roof, the black squad at the door.
From one or the other there was no escape.
Already the dark world was taking shape
That must engulf us if we did not fight.
Its shadow makes our shuttered towns seem bright.
Yes, even the blackened wall, the boarded pane,
The gutted roof seem gay against the stain
Of that dark shadow. Let us peer in it.

Letters to Malaya

What do we see? A nation in a pit.
A mighty race struck spiritually blind,
Yet keeping still the cunning of the mind.
A people, cultured once and wise and great,
Passing its children not through fire but hate,
As sacrifices to the Moloch-state,
Millions of men—most sinister of sights—
Whole towns their temples, practising the rites
Of massed herd-worship, swarming round a square
Of black moustache, a tuft of totem-hair,
And hailing it with arms stuck stiff in air.
Come, gaze again. How crimes compete with woes
In that dark pit, each picture to compose!
And every scene, what brutal strife it shows,
What intersway of violence and pain!
—War's planned approach and Cruelty's careful reign;
Children in classrooms chanting savage lies;
Fathers who're mute for fear their sons are spies;
Husbands and wives in anguish forced apart,
The body mutilated, and the heart;

Letters to Malaya

Injustice codified; a system, Fear;
And like an icy whisper in the ear
Of anyone whose ways are not the herd's,
Dachau and Buchenwald, those baleful words.
—What need go on? Those names will cover all;
Whate'er's forgotten, they're indelible.
And from their blackened blotches may be guessed
The foulness of the ink that writes the rest.
So here I'll make a pause. I once had thought,
In vindication of the war we've fought,
To draw in detail, with unflinching pen,
The horrors of those Bastilles of the glen,
Those grim alfresco Broadmoors, in whose shacks
The guards, not guarded, are the maniacs.
Already, vivid as an actual view,
Their likely aspect and approach I knew—
The lopped and pitted hills, more flint than green;
The huts sequestered, guessed at, never seen;
The fence that rings them, higher than a man;
The farmless road; the black malignant van

Letters to Malaya

That pauses where the fence becomes a gate,
Another load of human scrap its freight.
—All such, I thought, in calm and level tone,
Though horrible, my letters might have shown;
And as in earlier lines a wreck, a raid,
So now a prison camp could be displayed.
But when I came to probe the haunt of fear;
To eye the foul inflictions, and to hear;
To see ill-treatment made a fixed routine;
Brutality, a daily rite obscene,
The flogging-block its altar; to behold
Men innocent, respected, gifted, old,
Whipped, drudged to death, or made the helpless toys
Of criminals and trained, sadistic boys;
And all as part of a consistent plan
To subjugate a nation to a man:
Why then, my friend, I found I lacked the skill
To speak my thoughts, and be coherent still.
For as with grief or fear or angry curse
The voice may choke or quaver, so the verse.

Letters to Malaya

And, gazing at that hillside's ghastly cage,
I could but shudder, in relief and rage;
Aware, had Fate but nodded to allow,
Round my top fields might such a fence run now.

Thus the three years have passed, the three proposed;
By now you should be back, my poem closed.
By now, had times but kept their former trend,
Friend would be sitting chair by chair with friend,
Long happy hours of leisured talk ahead;
In print these verses waiting to be read;
Ipsden in surge around us, white with may;
My cellar at your service, and my hay.
Instead, what altered hopes my feelings stir!
—What yours may be I try not to infer—
Now not for you, but news of you, I wait.
No longer 'tis mere miles that separate.
To the wide interspace of steppes or seas
Which once you had to cross, and crossed with ease
On journey home, implacably to these
A twist of metal, stretched from stick to stick,
Has now been added, not a finger thick,

Letters to Malaya

But harder its fixed thinness to be passed
Than jungle, ocean, Himalayas vast.
And as I muse beside the unlit fire,
And wince at Dachau and its hideous wire,
How easily to you my shudder flies!
It's but to stunt the sentry, slope his eyes,
Alter the climate, the worst tortures tame,
Leaving the barbed enclosure much the same,
And straight I see the camp in which you dwell.
Though where it is no news comes yet to tell;
No news, and fifteen months since Ipoh fell!
And this uncertainty—place, climate, food,
Health, treatment, unknown whether ill or good—
What scope it gives to my solicitude!
Allowing me to see you, sun-worn, pale,
Listless, some devil's settlement your jail:
Heat, like the sentry, ever present there
By day; by night the humming, humid air,
Close as a crowded tent's in our worst August glare.
What chance for vigour, health in such a steam?

Letters to Malaya

Then hope comes in, and soars to her extreme,
Nor merely mitigates with breeze and sea,
But round you spreads Formosa's scenery:
Jagged and lush, soft-valleyed, snowy-piled,
An oriental Sicily, half wild,
Half fertile, plains of rice and eagle's wing,
And perched between the two your prison-ring;
The sea a sapphire space, its unheard edge
As fixed and far beneath you as the wedge
Of a wide peak is fixed and far above.
And rampant everywhere, red, halcyon, mauve,
The wild convolvulus, its gorgeous twines
So thick that here and there the landscape shines
With lakes of blossom, burns with blossom fires
Which flutter their spent glory through your wires,
Or even your dormitory windows through,
That when you wake you find a patch of blue
Bright as a kingfisher upon your bed,
In contrast to the bare, surrounding shed,
And, gazing at it, hear from neighbouring dells

Letters to Malaya

Perhaps the sound of pipes and tinkling bells,
As yellow goat-herds flute a hymn divine
In honour of a slant-eyed Proserpine.
Romantic sounds! Yet to your captive's ear
Of little consequence. You'd rather hear
The traffic-surge at Carfax changing gear;
Or listen to the homely clink that's made,
Spoon against saucer, as the breakfast's laid.
Nor is it for such sounds I wish you there.
But so that I could think the crisp, cool air
Left you internment, and no more, to bear.
For that alone's enough to try your powers—
The narrow space, the endless stretch of hours,
The circling fence you come to know so well
Its very posts grow recognizable
Like faces, each distinctive, this one dark
With knots, this leaning, or with strip of bark
Unsawn; each tiny trait you learn to mark
As there you stroll, shorts shabby, hair a-shine
Above dark broken glasses lashed with twine.

Letters to Malaya

For what's to do but stroll and gaze and chat,
Stare at your hands, or through them twirl your hat,
No letter being allowed to go or come,
No news or parcel to arrive from home,
Wherewith to ease the clench of boredom's vice,
Or intermit monotony and rice;
No book in all that crowded camp, no pen,
Nothing to study but your fellow men,
No well-loved poem to re-read apart,
And only my epistles known by heart.
Such your predicament—half guessed, half known—
And such—in letters, not in life—my own,
Who, far from my intended orbit strayed,
Find still my poem's homeward course delayed,
And check, grow slack, and falter on my track,
And wonder whether to go on or back.
For many a month, and many a page, long past
War's been my theme. Exalted or aghast,
Its cause I've traced, its early crisis shown
When England staved surrender off alone,

Letters to Malaya

Before the Western arsenal awoke,
Stirred into fury by one bitter stroke,
Or Russia, deemed a communistic sprawl,
Proved a united nation after all,
And showed the bear was able still to maul.
Since then the battle's broadened. Losses, gains,
Tobruk's and Stalingrad's and Alamein's,
Have brought their shocks, their glories—chapters all
In the fierce climax of the tyrant's fall,
Who, lured into disaster by success,
Learns at long last the power of Nemesis
—Great Nemesis, the trapper of the gods,
Hitlers and Bonapartes his brocks and tods.
Yet not to tell of these my pen I'll dip,
But even the coming culmination skip.
For now the gaze of men begins to shift
Back to the future, as with many a rift
The war-clouds widen overhead, and show
Sunlit the thundercaps of Peace below,
Verging the pale blue light of victory's sky.

Letters to Malaya

And such as well my gaze must occupy:
Cloud-riddles of the future, range on range
Slowly assembling, shapes that ever change—
Red glomerations, blurts of deluge, mild
Utopian vision-summits, golden-piled.
What do they augur? What interpretations
Can gazer give to their far-off formations?
Is that huge hump a sickle's or a dome's?
And does it tell of Moscow's might, or Rome's?
Those shafts of sunlight, bright against the dark,
Which happy country does their splendour mark?
Is it on England's southern chalk they shine?
And will our nation, from an hour that's fine
Move on to others, and its power display
Not just in war, to point mankind the way?
Or will it seek once more, supine, at peace,
To live by bread alone, and circuses,
Flourishing, as a state when glory flies
Alone can flourish, in its merchandise?
And, if indeed their milieu men re-make,

Letters to Malaya

What form will the risorgimento take?
Will the sick Age, to cleanse itself from strife,
Dip in the Jordan of a simpler life,
And not prefer, revising tariffs, borders,
The Abbana and Pharphar of New Orders?
Will it be cured, if in these last it dips?
Will the Four Freedoms of the Apocalypse
Ride through the earth, all evils to redress?
(What of the fifth, freedom from ugliness?)
And when all aims are settled, one by one,
And seers have said their best, and statesmen done,
Will the new world, united, peaceful grown,
Prove more than a projection of our own,
Made prosperous by scientific skill,
And immunized from war and want and ill?
—A world self-linked, but lost the link with Heaven:
So rich in wonders, every house has seven;
So bare of beauty, every shape repels;
But free from slums and smuts and plagues and smells;
And blessed by arts unknown to history's page,

Letters to Malaya

And Medicine's new gift to Man, old age;
Tides harnessed, flocks and herds no longer mated
But artificially inseminated;
All Ipsden's cooking done from Cornwall's coast,
Its heifers got in calf by parcel post—
Such queries grow with asking, hook breeds hook.
The answers time will bring—or my next book.
For of those quandaries I hope to sing,
And to my triptych add the final wing:
War being its centre-piece; in wings less wide
The years before and after arched on either side.
So spreads the bold design—one panel still
Awaiting with blank board the artist's skill.
But easier it is to plan than fill.
How long ago it seems since first I chose
In verse a letter, Alex, to compose,
Long both in time and in events; nor then
Could I foresee that one day from my pen
You'd be cut off; that, writing, I should lack
The tonic of your answers sparkling back,

Letters to Malaya

The friend's encouragement, the critic's sense,
At once my confidant and confidence.
That break might well have meant the poem's end,
And must have meant had you not been the friend.
For had our long acquaintanceship been less,
I should have lacked the faith I now possess,
Which—every hope of hearing from you gone—
Still gives me the assurance to write on,
Knowing, however long or wide the gap,
The filaments of friendship will not snap,
But still burn brightly on, and with their light
Give strength and zest to all I have to write.

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